



CATHOLIC SCHOOL PARENTS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION

Inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC)
sector in Australia

19 May 2023

VISION

To provide national leadership and advocacy for Catholic School parents to support quality learning and wellbeing for our children and young people.
MISSION: Family | Advocacy | Inspiration | Trust | Hope

VALUES: Faith | Integrity | Inclusivity | Respect | Engagement

Catholic School Parents Australia submission to the

Inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Australia.

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Australia*.

About Catholic School Parents Australia

Catholic School Parents Australia is recognised as the peak, national body representing and advocating for the parents* of the 794,000 children and young people who attend the 1,759 Catholic schools across Australia. CSPA works in collaboration and consultation with the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) and is recognised by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference through the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education.

Catholic School Parents Australia (CSPA) was formed in late 2013 by State and Territory Catholic school parent bodies. Members of CSPA consist of:

Catholic School Parents Archdiocese of Canberra & Goulburn.

Council of Catholic School Parents NSW.

Catholic School Parents Queensland.

Catholic School Parents South Australia.

Tasmanian Catholic Schools Parents Council.

Catholic School Parents Victoria.

Catholic School Parents Western Australia



1. Introduction

It is recognised that the first five years of a child's development are of vital importance and therefore it is paramount that these children are cared for and taught by qualified educators when in early childhood education and care centres. Also, this is an impressionable age where modelling through the actions of the adults in a young child's life can be critical.

Anecdotal evidence obtained from a number of parents* with children in early childhood education centres is outlined below. Later a number of recommendations are made based on the parent feedback.

2. Appreciation

Catholic preschool parents appreciate the recent increase to rebates for children in early childhood

[*It is noted that in this submission, 'parent' includes natural, adopted or foster parents, guardians or care givers of pre-school children attending an early education centre.]

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education and care centres as this can allow both parents having the option of returning to the work force/study/care giver work/other. Prior to this, it was not viable for many parents to participate in such activities as those noted above.

3. Curriculum

Concern was expressed at the interpretation in some centres of curriculum as set out in the National Quality Framework. There was favourable comment regarding the National Quality Framework as a governing document, however, emphasis was placed on the need to have adequately trained staff available to both interpret and deliver programs. While it is recognised that early childhood education and care (ECEC) should be play based, it should also be intentional and purposeful, and this requires an adequate number of trained professionals to deliver ECEC programs.

There can be a lack of consistency to curriculum delivery, and some believe that aspects of some programs are not maximising learning opportunities or scaffolding children's learning and development to support their transition into formal schooling. For example, a lack of consistency with regards certain skilling such as fine motor skill development, may not set a child up for future success when learning to write. Creating stronger connections between early childhood centres and primary schools will support seamless transitions into formal schooling for children.

Significant responsibility rests with the early childhood teacher and the knowledge and skills of the Diploma and Cert III and IV qualified educators developing and delivering the curriculum in ECEC services.

4. Competition around obtaining a place in an early childhood education and care centre

Preschool parents described the heightened anxiety and insecurity caused by the uncertainty of obtaining a place in an ECEC centre for their pre-school child. This can also impact a parent's ability to return to work. Concerning aspects of this include:

- Unborn children being booked in to an ECEC centre.
- Parents paying for days well in advance to keep a place as it becomes available, although not making immediate use of it – if not used for 12 weeks in a row the place is lost.
- Availability of places for children of parents who are part-time and/or shift workers.
- A child remaining in a year range group (which is not suitable) because there is no place available in the next year level group.
- Many children start day care as babies however, the baby room often has the biggest wait list. The 1:4 ratio for babies is agreed as appropriate, however the high human and physical resourcing required for this age group places great pressure on centre operations. Greater funding for this age group could relieve such pressure and assure more baby places are available.

5. The intersection of early childhood education and care and the world of work

Once the challenge of aligning an available early childhood centre place with parent needs is sorted, a number of concerns were raised by parents, these included:

- The propensity of young children taking illness to and from ECEC centres. Strict protocols regarding 'stay at home' need to be enforced. Certain restrictions need to be mandated rather than left to the discretion of the centres, for example, when children show COVID symptoms.
- Some parents noted that although their child may stay home (because of illness, COVID symptoms, public holidays, other) fees of up to \$145/day still required payment. While this was understandable for the ongoing remuneration of staff, this seemed unfair for some parents. Perhaps there could be some consideration to additional rebate in those circumstances.
- The discontinuation of the rebate after 60 days of absence of a child across a year could further financially penalise some parents who are already struggling with, for example, a very sick child. This could present as a further financial burden on parents whose paid work is likely to be very much reduced in such circumstances.
- The annual allocation of sick days from a parent's workplace can often be used up quickly by working parents with children in an ECEC centre.
- The availability of care outside normal work hours varies, although parents agree these hours are usually appropriately driven by the needs of the local community.

6. Matters concerning the staffing of early childhood and care centres

As noted earlier, it is recognised that the first five years of a child's development are of vital importance and therefore it is paramount that these children are cared for and taught by qualified educators when in early education and care centres. Parents raised concern in relation to staffing; these concerns included:

- The variation in qualifications of early childhood staff – there needs to be greater valuing of early childhood qualifications. Early childhood teachers should be paid as professional educators, however at the moment they are paid significantly less than teachers. There should be a review of the schedule of payments for early childhood teachers and other qualified educators working with children in ECEC services.
- The turnover of early childhood staff is very high and has detrimental implications for children under their education and care.
- Remuneration levels do not present attractively to qualified early childhood teachers and are seen as a causal factor of staffing instability in early childhood education and care centres.
- There are few males working in ECEC centres.

7. Equitable support for marginalised families

The generous support provided for pre-school children from marginalised families should continue. It is believed that such support, to help relieve a multitude of challenges at this most vulnerable age, is preferred over a potential lifetime of welfare dependence and poor wellbeing for these children.

8. Two years of pre-schooling

¹*Preschool – Two Years are Better Than One Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds – evidence, policy and implementation* (October 2016) by Fox

¹Available at: <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/two-years-are-better-than-one-mitchell-institute.pdf>

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and Geddes, provides a comprehensive outline and argument for funding of three and four-year-olds as part of an early childhood education strategy. It would seem that a nation-wide approach to two years of pre-school could assist in helping to overcome many concerns, especially those around funding insecurity. In turn, this is likely to have a positive knock-on effect for staffing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CSPA recommends the following.

1. That there be improved remuneration and status for early childhood teachers and other qualified staff. It is recommended that early childhood staff are remunerated at comparable rates as that for primary and secondary teachers.
2. That greater connection be forged between early childhood education and primary schooling. Wherever possible, there needs to be a seamless and hierarchical transition in relation to skilling associated with social, emotional, literacy and numeracy development.
3. That consideration be given, wherever possible, to funding the establishment of early childhood education and care centres on existing primary school sites, including Catholic primary schools.
4. That the existing arrangements regarding payments when children are absent from ECEC centres due to sickness be reviewed towards lessening the financial impact on centres and parents.
5. That increased government funding be provided to facilitate proposed changes, including a national extension to two years of funded pre-school education - including the enrolments in Catholic Early Learning Centres.